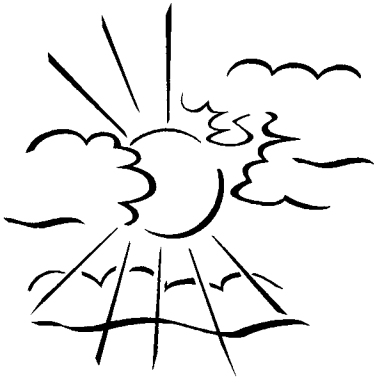


***Department
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Human
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**Prepared by the
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Articles in Today's Clips

Wednesday, January 25, 2006

(Be sure to maximize your screen to read your clips)

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***Important story at this spot**

Published January 25, 2006

Insurance: To push health plan, Granholm should present it selfishly

A Lansing State Journal editorial

If Gov. Jennifer Granholm unveils a \$1 billion plan to expand health coverage in her State of the State address tonight, she deserves kudos. Dealing with health care isn't politically easy, but is a policy necessity.

Expect, however, the response to Granholm's plan to quickly focus on its potential cost. That's not conducive to reform, nor even to an honest debate.

No man is an island when it comes to health care. Insured Michigan residents, without Granholm's plan, now pay for their uninsured neighbors; pay quite a bit, actually.

An analysis by the consumer group Families USA stated that "uncompensated" care for the uninsured would cost Michigan \$1.1 billion in 2005 alone. Families USA also said that paying for uninsured care added an average of \$922 to the annual family insurance premium. Those costs stem in part because uninsured people tend to forgo cost-efficient preventive care, ending up in expensive emergency rooms later.

Michigan is lucky in some ways, though.

The state has a higher percentage of people on employer-based insurance than the national average (2004 figures - 59 percent vs. 54 percent). And Michigan's uninsured population (11 percent) was much smaller than the national average (16 percent).

Nevertheless, the number of uninsured in Michigan - 1 million-plus - is roughly equal to the number in the Medicare or Medicaid programs, according to statehealthfacts.org.

Granholm's plan, says the Gongwer News Service, would use money saved from the Medicaid program to extend health coverage to up to 500,000 people. Granholm also would involve private insurers in getting coverage to uninsured working families.

That's quite appealing fiscally, especially in contrast to a bill moving through the Massachusetts Legislature that would require businesses with at least 10 employees to offer insurance or pay a fee to support a broader state program.

The governor, though, will have a hard fight over even good numbers.

Insured Michigan residents are nervously watching their own situations. The percentage of Americans covered by employer plans is shrinking. The particular woes of Michigan's manufacturing economy - and its highly prized benefit programs - are well-known.

Granholm's charge will be to show how dealing with the uninsured directly benefits the insured. That might be a selfish way of looking at things, but it's the only way reform is going to get anywhere this year.

Senator discusses Medicare Part D

BY JEREMY MCBAIN NEWS-REVIEW STAFF WRITER

Tuesday, January 24, 2006 11:36 AM EST

Michigan senator Debbie Stabenow presented short term and long term fixes to Medicare Part D in a teleconference Monday with state journalists.

Stabenow said the government must fix the changes it made to Medicare - which she opposed - adding Part D is too confusing and has few benefits for seniors.

"I always felt this was a pharmaceutical drug company benefit, not a senior citizen benefit," she said.

Stabenow said Democrats have introduced some short-term bills that say if someone hasn't been processed into the new plan yet, but they need their drugs, the federal government will provide those needed drugs until the paperwork is completed.

For her long term fix, Stabenow said she is going to introduce a bill that would set up a drug benefit in Part D "as it should have been." She said the bill would call for an optional plan that gives the federal government the ability to negotiate for group drug prices.

She said the current plan gives huge subsidies to the pharmaceutical industry and does not allow the federal government to negotiate prices.

"It is a straightforward Medicare operated prescription drug plan," she said.

She said she is in the process of writing the bill and it will be completed soon.

Stabenow said her office has been overwhelmed by telephone calls from people who are having trouble with the new Medicare plan. She said people are confused about Part D and some are not getting their medication.

She added she has even received telephone calls from pharmacists seeking help, saying when they call the insurance companies covering Part D, they are put on hold for sometimes hours. Pharmacists are being told to give people a 30-day supply of medicine if they are having trouble with their Medicare Part D paperwork, but Stabenow said those 30 days are almost up and the plan is still confusing. Furthermore, the government has not even said if it will reimburse pharmacies for providing those 30-day supplies to people.

Stabenow said the confusion created by the Medicare changes are not just temporary pains of change, but built in as an effort to privatize Medicare.

"This is a conscious effort to dismantle Medicare as we know it," she said.

She added Democratic and Republican governors are speaking out about the Medicare changes.

“For the states this will probably cost them more money than the other (original Medicare),” she said.

In addition to discussing Medicare, Stabenow also addressed Monday's news of massive layoffs and plant closings at Ford.

Stabenow said she was deeply concerned about it, adding it will affect not only those who have been laid off, but suppliers and manufacturers throughout the state.

“This is a very serious blow for us and a wake up call to the country about a need to change our policies,” she said.

Stabenow said she will do whatever she can for the workers, such as getting them access to government agencies and programs.

She added she will do whatever she can to keep manufacturing in the country.

“I wish I could say this administration (the administration of President George Bush) gets it, but they don't,” she said.

Stabenow said to help manufacturers the government needs to first enforce the trade laws and cut currency manipulation by China. In addition to this she pointed to a growing trade in counterfeit parts, saying the government needs to toughen up counterfeiting laws.

Stabenow dismissed opinions that unions wages are even somewhat at fault for the closings. She said these wages have created the “great middle class” that has been an economic engine for the country.

“If we say we can only compete if people in this country work for less, that is a lose-lose strategy. There is always someone who can work for less,” she said.

She also dismissed opinions that Michigan is not doing enough to support its manufacturing industry. Stabenow said the state cannot enforce trade agreements and it cannot change the way the country funds health care, but the federal government can.

Stabenow added the nation's economic woes are related to health care issues.

“If you ask Bill Ford what the most important thing is, he will say health care,” she said. “But, there is not the political will in Washington to take on the pharmaceutical lobby and the insurance lobby.”

Jeremy McBain can be contacted at 439-9316, or jmcbain@petoskeynews.com.

Medicare is still playing catchup

Bush administration's prediction of smooth transition to plan foiled by computer glitches.

Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar and Lisa Girion / Los Angeles Times

January 25, 2006

WASHINGTON -- The new Medicare prescription drug program was supposed to start humming almost with the flick of a switch. As the Bush administration envisioned it, beginning Jan. 1, millions of Medicare beneficiaries would be able to go to their pharmacies and get hefty discounts on their prescriptions.

But in the opening days, when druggists tried to enter customers names into the computerized verification system, what they got was an ominous message: "host down" -- cyber talk for system overloaded, unable to respond. Computer system operators were still frantically uploading the names and other information on tens of thousands of Medicare recipients. Three weeks later, Medicare is still catching up, although top officials say the situation is improving every day. Creation of the Medicare prescription benefit, the biggest expansion of the health care program for the elderly in decades, was to be the crown jewel of the Bush administration's domestic record -- the first large-scale test of its theory that the best way to deliver social services such as health care is through the private sector. And before Jan. 1, administration officials confidently predicted that concerns about the complex program soon would evaporate.

With so much riding on the new program, and with the government's best health care experts having had two years to prepare, how could the launch have stumbled so badly?

How did it happen that crucial computer databases were not ready, and that when they did become available, were found to be shot through with errors? Why was the system plunged into such confusion and uncertainty that hundreds of thousands of elderly Medicare recipients were in danger of not getting medication?

The answers have a familiar ring. Senior officials brushed aside advance warnings about many of the problems that materialized when the plan went into effect, critics in both political parties say. "We pointed out all of the predictable problems, and they have been realized," said Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., chairman of the Senate Special Committee on Aging. "The administration had a lot of pride of ownership in the initial legislation," Smith added, and anyone who suggested changes "was persona non grata."

But Congress -- which approved the legislation largely along party lines -- also shares in the blame.

For example, the Jan. 1 switch in drug coverage from Medicaid to Medicare for more than 6 million people was written into the legislation. The one-day changeover is widely acknowledged to be the biggest source of problems.

Congress was deeply involved in other provisions as well. According to Medicare Administrator Mark McClellan, for example, the law allows Medicare beneficiaries to sign up for a coverage plan up to the last day of a month and get service the first day of the following month.

New York Acts to Coordinate Child Welfare

By JIM RUTENBERG and LESLIE KAUFMAN
The New York Times

Published: January 25, 2006

Responding to the city's failure to prevent the death of a 7-year-old girl in a home already under investigation for abuse, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg yesterday announced that retired law enforcement workers would be dispatched to work in child welfare offices and that he would create a new mayoral office to ensure that city agencies work together to prevent abuse. The changes - which include a greatly reinforced monitoring system for children in troubled homes - were some of the most extensive to the system that handles child abuse cases since it was restructured some 10 years ago after the death of 6-year-old Elisa Izquierdo at the hands of her mother.

Officials said yesterday's changes, which received initial positive reaction from children's advocacy groups, were devised to enhance that system, not dismantle and rebuild it from scratch. Still, they were a reflection of the city's determination in recent weeks to improve a system that while often held up as a national model, continues to have clear, and potentially deadly, shortcomings.

Referring to the case that set the changes in motion, the beating death of Nixzmary Brown this month, Mr. Bloomberg said, "We are determined to find out exactly where the system broke down and to marshal the resources to fix it."

Many of the changes highlighted yesterday were aimed at more closely monitoring households in which investigators believe children could be at risk but should not necessarily be removed from their parents.

Mr. Bloomberg said the city would devote an additional \$16 million to the Administration for Children's Services to hire managers and caseworkers and to give more training to current caseworkers.

The agency, meanwhile, will redirect \$9 million of its existing budget into the new effort as well, officials said.

Central to the changes is the bolstering of the Children's Services unit that is devoted to monitoring cases in which workers have concerns about a family's situation but are not yet prepared to remove children from their parents.

The city will nearly double the size of that division's staff, to 550 from 300, and rename it the Intensified Family Services Unit. The division will monitor cases more aggressively, and officials said it would be equipped to handle an additional 7,000 troubled families.

In theory, the new workers will give the agency the option of providing services and scrutiny to a much larger number of cases in which the child is not removed from the home.

On top of that, the mayor said the city would place 20 "seasoned law enforcement professionals" in the city's 14 children's services offices to help train field workers in the latest investigative techniques and to intervene in specific cases when necessary.

"We're going to hire former cops or former assistant district attorneys - people, I said, with law enforcement experience," he said. "The issue here is, when do you call the N.Y.P.D. in and when should this be handled by a social service agency as opposed to a police agency?"

The changes seek to address shortcomings highlighted by the death of Nixzmary, whose case was on the radar of not only child welfare workers but also police officers and school officials. City officials have cited a range of failures, including the inability to get a warrant to enter the child's home to investigate suspected abuse before her death.

To that end, the city will also hire 32 lawyers who will make sure that Children's Services is efficiently handling Family Court cases and will be readily available to caseworkers seeking advice. And, Mr. Bloomberg said, Children's Services will have an additional 35 supervisors, an increase of nearly 50 percent that brings the number of case supervisors to 112 and, more important, officials say, reduces the number of cases each supervisor oversees.

Those personnel additions come on top of the city's announcement last week that it was in the process of adding 525 people to its ranks of frontline caseworkers, which will grow by nearly 10 percent all told, officials said.

In making the announcement yesterday with Mr. Bloomberg, Linda I. Gibbs, a deputy mayor, and the Children's Services commissioner, John B. Mattingly, gave the clearest indication to date of where they now believe the system broke down in the case of Nixzmary Brown.

Mr. Bloomberg cited faulty communication between officials at Nixzmary's school, who were urgently concerned about her well-being, and the caseworkers at Children's Services, who apparently were not.

"One of the most glaring failures in the tragedy of Nixzmary Brown occurred when a social worker and a guidance counselor at her school raised red flags about possible abuse or neglect but that sense of urgency wasn't absorbed by A.C.S.," Mr. Bloomberg said.

While officials have determined that caseworkers did not follow established procedures to call for police help in cases where families resist investigations, they have also determined that better coordination is needed between the police and Children's Services.

Those findings have led to the creation of a family services coordinator, a mayoral appointee who will be "primarily charged with looking for breeches in communications between city agencies that provide services to families in need, and then mending those breeches," the mayor said. Mr. Bloomberg indicated that the changes to the child welfare system would not end with yesterday's announcement.

He said the city was working to establish a more stringent series of red flags to prompt quicker action, including action at city schools.

"Right now the standards in place provide no clear guidance for school staff who should always be alert to excessive truancy," Mr. Bloomberg said.

"In Nixzmary's case, 46 days of school were missed before an official report was made."

Many child welfare advocates praised the mayor's actions yesterday, and credited them as seemingly well thought out and significant. "There has not been this level of interest in child protective work since the child welfare administration was created" in 1996, said Gail B. Nayowith, the executive director of the Citizens' Committee for Children, a nonprofit research and advocacy group.

POLICE BEAT

Ann Arbor News

Wednesday, January 25, 2006

Men try to coax girls into their vehicles

Ann Arbor Police are investigating two separate incidents Tuesday in which girls said men offered them rides or attempted to wave them into vehicles.

The incidents are not believed to be related.

In the earlier case, a 15-year-old Huron High School student said she was waiting for a city bus Tuesday when a man who claimed to work for the district pulled up and offered her a ride, police reported. The student said she was at an AATA bus stop in the 2400 block of Traver Boulevard at 12:30 p.m. when a man in a four-door dark green vehicle stopped and asked if she wanted a ride, reports said. The man said he worked for the district, but provided no name or identification.

The student said the man eventually left, and she caught the city bus, reports said. The incident was not reported until 4:15 p.m.

At 5:15 p.m., a 6-year-old girl and 10-year-old girl were walking home in the 700 block of Archwood Street when they said a man in a silver van pulled up, opened the sliding door, and attempted to wave the younger girl inside, reports said. The girls ran home and told their father, who said he saw a van driving in the area as well, reports said. Police could not locate the vehicle in the area.

Center comforts abused youth

By: Michael Neary

Story updated January 18, 2006 11:56AM

The Child Advocacy Center provides a calming setting for police interviews.

IDA — Since September, children in Monroe County who need to describe abusive incidents to detectives and other officials have been spared at least one stark discomfort: the interior of a police station. That's when the Child Advocacy Center of Monroe opened up in the form of The Little Farm House at 3879 Jackman Rd. in Ida.

A stroll around the house, which borders a farm, reveals a pair of stuffed animals and a modest selection of other toys in one room, along with a wooden rocking horse and a birdhouse on the porch. Wood floors, lit up by soft lamplight, bear an assortment of throw rugs.

"Some of the children we work with have had not the greatest experience with law enforcement," said Lisa Millyard, a Children's Protective Services worker in the county who conducts interviews in the center.

"And even if they had," she continued, "it's a scary experience" to go to a police station.

Small things in a police department such as buzzing doors — or larger things like guns hanging from holsters — can heighten the anxiety of children and their family in an already grueling time, according to Rebecca Pasko, the center's executive director.

Detective David LaMontaine of the Monroe County Sheriff's Office, who's interviewed children both at the center and inside the police department, said he's noticed "a difference in the demeanor of children" since interviews have started at the center.

"We've got kids that don't want to leave," he added.

Allison Arnold, an assistant prosecuting attorney for Monroe County, said she also has encountered children who want to linger in the house after the interview is over. But she noted that, despite the high comfort level, the house remains an uncluttered place with as few distractions as possible.

"You want a neutral conference room," she said. "Even in the lobby, you don't want a lot of distraction."

A glance at the conference room does reveal a clutter-free space, with bare walls and a large, round wooden table in the center.

Ms. Pasko said that about 12 interviews with children have taken place at the center since it opened in September — and that no more such interviews were planned in police stations in the

county.

Children come to The Little Farm House when abuse or neglect has become serious enough to require interviews with the police, she explained. She said that the idea to create such a center in the county came from the Sexual Abuse Task Force, part of the Child Abuse and Neglect Council of Monroe.

"They discovered there was a movement across the country (for) child advocacy centers," said Ms. Pasko.

"It was having the awareness that there was a better way of doing what we were doing," said Patricia M. Poupard, a general counsel to the Child Advocacy Center and one of the original members of the Sexual Abuse Task Force.

A grant for \$20,000 in federal funds helped train police officers in 2003, according to Ms. Pasko. That money was followed up with a \$50,000 federal grant in 2004.

At that point, Ms. Pasko said, efforts to open a center in conjunction with Catholic Charities of Monroe County failed — and plans for the center were put on hold. Now, depending entirely on donations, the center is running as an independent nonprofit organization in the former parsonage of Immanuel Lutheran Church.

"There were philosophical differences between the way Catholic Charities wanted to run the center and the way the people who went through the training wanted to run it," said Ms. Poupard.

Ms. Pasko said she hoped for a grant to boost finances in 2007, but, for now, she said, the center is heavily dependent on donations.

According to Ms. Pasko, part of what makes the interview process less traumatic than it used to be is conducting a single interview with all of the needed experts and officials listening in.

Rather than conducting multiple interviews, child protection workers and members of the police, the prosecutor's office and the Child Advocacy Center draw from a single interview, with one person asking questions and the others upstairs watching through a closed-circuit TV.

That procedure, though made easier in the house, had been followed for several years in police stations, according to Ms. Pasko.

But other aspects of the interview process could not occur in a police station. Mrs. Millyard recalls a child who wasn't talking about what had happened to him when someone decided to bring in the wooden rocking horse from outside. Suddenly, she said, the child climbed on top.

"He just started rocking on the horse and talking away," said Mrs. Millyard.

Mrs. Millyard emphasized that people who suspect child abuse should call Children's Protective Services at 243-7400.

Ms. Pasko also noted that she hoped to organize counseling for victim family members but that such services depended on funding. A Texas Hold'em tournament fundraiser to benefit the center will take place from 6 to midnight Saturday at the Monroe Moose Lodge.

Anyone searching for information about that fundraiser can call 777-6019 or 777-6021.

Sexual assault case in court

By Kristofer Karol
DAILY PRESS & ARGUS

The Livingston County Juvenile Court will have to wait until Feb. 1 to hear the plea of a 13-year-old boy accused of sexually assaulting a 7-year-old girl at the Brighton District Library last month.

After a pretrial hearing that lasted less than 20 minutes on Tuesday, Juvenile Court referee Kathleen M. Oemke set that date, as well as a jury trial date of Feb. 15 before Judge Susan Reck.

Assistant Prosecutor Marilyn Bradford did mention a possible "offer" between the two parties during the pretrial hearing, while the defense attorney, Mitchell Perrault, asked for more time to discuss the matter with the boy and his parents. Perrault and Bradford declined to comment after the hearing.

The names of the two Brighton children involved in the case are not being printed by the Daily Press & Argus because they are juveniles.

The teen is currently charged with first-degree criminal sexual conduct, second-degree criminal sexual conduct, accosting a child for immoral purposes and gross indecency.

If convicted, the teen, who is being charged as a juvenile, could face several sentencing options, which include being sent home, probation, placement in a foster home, or incarceration at W.J. Maxey Boys Training School in Green Oak Township, Prosecutor David Morse has said.

The boy continues to be housed at a juvenile detention center in Washtenaw County, and has a bond set at \$100,000.

The Michigan State Police is investigating another girl's claim that the teen also sexually assaulted her.

The December incident was a factor in the Brighton District Library Board of Trustees' decision to purchase seven security cameras for \$5,700 last month. The purchase was also to keep a better eye on the Bookmobile.

In addition to the cameras, board members have also discussed looking into putting locks or a buzzer entry system, similar to an apartment complex, on the building's three bathrooms.

Originally published January 25, 2006

Jurors weigh teen's fate

Wednesday, January 25, 2006

DARRYL Q. TUCKER
THE SAGINAW NEWS

Clarence W. Russell III admits he shot 16-year-old Daniel Foster on Oct. 20 in Saginaw High School, but he claims it was because he feared for his life.

Russell, who testified during his trial Tuesday in Saginaw County Circuit Court, said he acted in self-defense because Foster lifted his shirt and showed a gun.

"I thought he was going to shoot me," Russell told a jury of seven men and seven women.

Foster said he was a member of a gang on the city's South Side.

Prosecutors charged Russell, 16, with assault with intent to commit murder, carrying a concealed weapon, receiving or concealing a stolen weapon, carrying a dangerous weapon with unlawful intent and possessing a firearm while committing a felony at 3100 Webber.

Today, jurors were to deliberate Russell's fate.

Russell said he knew Foster from when they were in juvenile detention together, a claim that Foster has denied.

In a classroom, the two argued because Russell said his brother was a witness in a homicide in 2005 and Foster didn't approve of him testifying. Russell told jurors that weeks later, he was at Saginaw High and Foster threatened to kill him if he returned to the campus.

Russell said he skipped school for a week, returning Oct. 20.

While in the stairwell, Russell said, Foster directed a derogatory name toward him and then displayed the gun.

Russell said he reached into his bookbag, pulled out a .380 semi-automatic handgun and shot Foster once. Russell said he then fled the school, only to get caught by security officer Al Pipkins.

Russell said he bought the \$80 gun for protection. He said the money came from his \$15 a week allowance.

Under cross-examination, Russell said he never told anyone until recently that Foster had a gun at the school. He said he also didn't tell anyone that Foster and his friends shot at him as he drove his mother's car after school on Webber a few weeks before the school shooting.

Russell said no one asked him, so he didn't tell anyone.

"I was scared," he said.

Russell, who is in jail without bond, faces a sentence of up to life in prison.

The shooting occurred when Foster, who was between classes during his lunch hour, walked to the first floor and spotted Russell, authorities said.

Foster, who was hospitalized for a week with the chest wound, testified earlier that he had never met Russell when the teen glared at him in the school hallway.

Published January 25, 2006

[From the Lansing State Journal]

Local news briefs

Woman pleads guilty in nursing home case

A 68-year-old Lansing nurse who investigators said abused a 95-year-old nursing home patient pleaded guilty last month to reduced charges.

Margaret Haeck, a licensed practical nurse who worked at Tendercare West Nursing Home in Delta Township, was accused in September 2005 of not finding or removing nitroglycerin patches from an elderly female patient before applying new patches.

The events happened in February 2005 and March 2005, prosecutors said, and as a result, the patient had to be transferred to a hospital and treated for low blood pressure and a low heart rate.

Advertisement

Haeck pleaded guilty in December to recklessly placing false information in the patient's medical chart, according to Eaton County District Court records.

Haeck's daughter, Mary Buzas, speaking on behalf of her mother, said her mother didn't intentionally harm the patient.

Haeck no longer works at Tendercare, but Buzas said she retained her license and is caring for two in-home geriatric patients.

Lawmakers approve home heating assistance legislation

(Lansing, January 24, 2006, 11:59 a.m.)

House lawmakers in Lansing approved a bill Tuesday morning to free up millions of dollars to help Michigan's low-income families with home heating assistance.

The House Appropriations Committee voted to allow \$21.5 million, which came from a surplus in the Michigan Public Service Commission budget, to be used to help residents struggling with their heating bills.

The legislation now goes to the full House, which is expected to approve the measure. The bill then goes on the fast track to Governor Jennifer Granholm for her signature.

The money will go to the Department of Human Services, which will distribute the money to local agencies that will distribute the heating assistance to local families.

Posted: 1-24-2006

Program warms local children

By KEVIN BRACISZESKI
Daily News Staff Writer

About 175 area children are warmer this winter thanks to local donations to Warm the Children.

Those children were among 250 names forwarded to the program by the Michigan Department of Human Services, and 86 individuals and groups so far have donated \$9,700 to the Ludington Daily News program to buy those children warm clothes.

Warm the Children — a cooperative effort between the Daily News and the community — is now in its 12th year, said Michelle Piotrowski, the newspaper's Warm the Children coordinator.

Families who qualify are referred to the program by the state, and volunteer shoppers — recruited by the Daily News — are assigned to a family. They meet at a local store, and each child is allowed up to \$80 worth of warm winter clothes. The stores offer discounts and then bill the Warm the Children fund. The donated money is used for these purchases only; the administrative fees are covered by the Daily News.

"I like the program," Piotrowski said. "It's a community-based program and all the money donated from the community stays in the community (with purchases at local stores.)"

"And it's good to see exactly where the money is going while helping to keep children warm in our community," she said.

The donations are tax-deductible, Piotrowski said, adding that although the shopping takes place in the winter, the donations and volunteering can occur throughout the year.

After the group spends its initial donations on warm children's clothing, it then shops for families on a family-by-family basis as more money comes in.

Employees at Memorial Medical Center recently announced they had raised \$592 in donations for the program through casual Fridays at the hospital in November, December and January.

Bill Kerans, public relations coordinator for the hospital, said Memorial Medical Center employees donated more than \$12,000 to charities in 2005 by paying \$2 each to dress down at work during casual Fridays, with \$592 earmarked for Warm the Children.

Sally Larson of Scottville is pleased to participate in the program.

"I have been a contributor/volunteer shopper for Warm the Children for several years and it has been a very rewarding experience," she said in a letter to the Daily News.

"Warm the Children is a great program. The children are always excited to get new clothes, and the parents are always very appreciative. One mother told me several times while we were shopping recently that she was 'very thankful and blessed' that her family was chosen to receive clothing through Warm the Children.

"My daughter, Christine, has been a volunteer shopper with the program and this year my son, Andrew, also participated, acquiring community service hours as a member of the National Honor Society," Larson said. "I would encourage everyone to support

Warm the Children. If organizations — including school organizations such as student council, National Honor Society, etc. — are looking for a worthwhile fund-raising/volunteer project, they should consider Warm the Children. It's a wonderful way to help needy children right here in our own community."

Piotrowski said shopping for the children ends when the donated money runs out, and children who are left on the list will move up to be the program's top priorities when the next shopping season arrives.

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843-1122, ext. 346

Housing agent pleads guilty

Wednesday, January 25, 2006

Ann Arbor News Staff Reporter

DETROIT - A woman responsible for administering federal housing subsidies to low-income Washtenaw County residents for more than a decade admitted Tuesday to stealing more than \$1 million in rental housing vouchers.

LaToya Cotton, 45, pleaded guilty to fraud charges in federal court in Detroit Tuesday.

As part of the plea, Cotton agreed with federal prosecutors to serve between 37 and 46 months in federal prison with two to three years of supervised release, said Assistant U.S. Attorney Michael Bullotta.

She must also forfeit her \$830,000 Canton Township home and repay the stolen amount, according to the deal.

Theft from a federally funded program is punishable by up to 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

Cotton was an agent with the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) and was responsible for enrolling candidates into programs such as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Section 8 housing program. She also acted as the sole administrator of their payments.

Court documents show Cotton falsely created eligible clients and had payments for legitimate voucher recipients forwarded to a bank account for Washtenaw Payee Services, which she then took for her personal use. The thefts occurred from 1994 to 2005, documents show. An unemotional Cotton admitted taking the money for herself, instead of helping low-income people receive housing, and that her business was a shell company that allowed her to defraud the government.

She declined comment after Tuesday's hearing.

"The plea agreement speaks for itself," said her attorney, Timothy McDaniel.

Senior Special Agent Greg Stejskal of the Ann Arbor FBI office said that Cotton established the company prior to becoming a MSHDA agent in 1990 and that it paid bills for people who had difficulty making ends meet. Once she began a contract with the state, she saw an opportunity and it just snowballed, he said.

Investigators probed Cotton's voucher activities starting in 1990 but could not find evidence of fraud prior to 1994.

At the time of their investigation, Stejskal said, there were eight active eligible voucher recipients Cotton worked with and many others on a waiting list. As many as 50 different people were used to perpetrate the crime.

Cotton received \$25 per month per voucher and over the years had roughly 400 clients in all, officials said.

"The good news is that we caught it," Stejskal said.

McDaniel said sentencing could be in three to four months at the earliest and that Cotton waived her right to appeal as part of the agreement. She remains free on bond.

U.S. District Judge Patrick Duggan requested a presentencing report and said that upon review he will determine whether the sentencing agreement is appropriate.

HUD officials said this was the first case of this type of housing fraud prosecuted in Michigan and that the appropriate state and federal agencies are better at scrutinizing housing agents who act as independent contractors.

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